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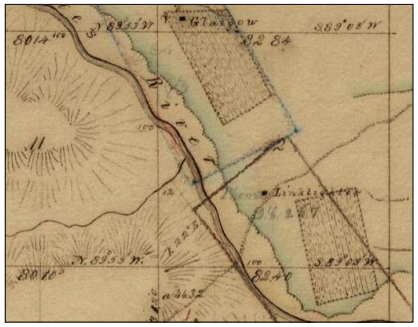

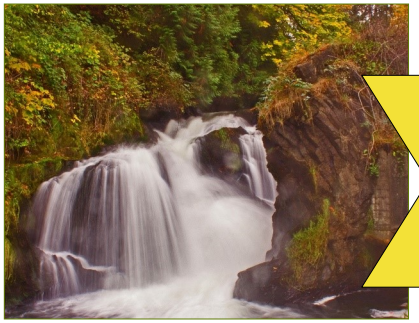

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The U.S. Army Amphibious Training Camp on Henderson Inlet, 1940-1944

A Whale of a Story

$5.00

The U.S. Army Amphibious Training Camp on Henderson Inlet, 1940-1944

James S. Hannum, M.D.

For several years during World War II, the United States Army utilized an amphibious training camp in Thurston County. It was located north of Olympia, on the west side of Henderson Inlet. The facility was a satellite of the base at Fort Lewis. Although its presence was not a secret, the location was not publicized, no doubt out of concerns about security.

The camp was sited in Sections 7 and 8 of Township 19 North, Range 1 West. Most of the buildings constructed by the army were in Section 8, in the south half of Lot 2. On the 1962 Metsker map of Thurston County (not displayed here), the boundaries of the former camp correspond to the property owned in that year by Don Esterly. In 2024, most of the surviving camp structures are used as private residences.

A December 1940 newspaper article reported: "Olympia, Dec. 5,—Reports that the army has under consideration a proposal to construct a military post on Henderson inlet, also known

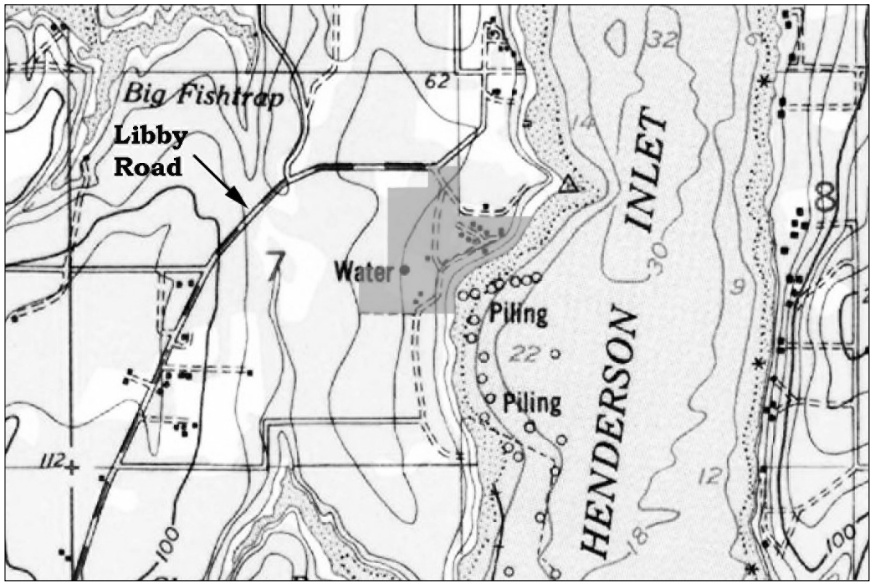


Image 1. An image of a portion of the 1949 U.S. Geological Survey map of the Olympia Quadrangle. The area occupied by U.S. Army's Amphibious Training Camp has been shaded by the author. On this map, "Water" designates the position of an elevated water tank that supplied fresh water to the camp (https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview : accessed November 19, 2024).

as South Bay, were a primary topic of conversation in Olympia today, although no authoritative statement on the purported plan could be obtained.

"The site which the reports say has been chosen tentatively is about 10 miles north of Olympia, on the west side of Henderson inlet and approximately one mile from its mouth.

"The post would be used for training troops in landing operations, according to the rumor, and 52 small, high speed motorboats would be used for this purpose. It would be the first such post in the Pacific Northwest.

"Army officers at Fort Lewis declined to comment, but Henderson inlet residents said officers have made frequent trips to the area in recent weeks, making surveys of possible sites for the post.

"One woman said an army officer told her the spot reported selected was chosen because it is 'well protected,' that 250 men using 52 speedy motorboats would be stationed at the new post, and that several buildings, including barracks, would be constructed on the slopes above the shore. She added the officer told her the construction would begin early this month."[1]

Duane Colt Denfeld, Ph.D., who has served as historian at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, explains that the camp on Henderson Inlet was part of the 15th Infantry Regiment stationed at Fort Lewis. That regiment was organized on May 3, 1861 at the onset of the Civil War. It had seen service during the Indian Wars and the Philippines and was sent to China in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion. It came back to the United States in 1906 and then returned to China in 1912. The regiment returned to the United States in 1938 and was stationed at Fort Lewis.

"In January 1940 the regiment became part of the 3rd Division and ac-

Image 2. A map of the Republic of New Lemuria. Here, Taongi Island appears in the upper right corner. The "imaginary island" mentioned in Dr. Denfeld's publication was based on a real Pacific island. Government Statistics of the Taongi atoll Islands of the Republic of New Lemuria (https://newlemuria.org/taongi/index_taongi.to.htm : accessed November 15, 2023).

companied the division to large maneuvers at Fort Ord, California. These maneuvers included amphibious landings. In March 1940 Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower was assigned to the 15th Regiment as the First Battalion commander and regimental executive officer. He increased the training tempo.

"The regiment returned to Fort Lewis in May and then employed lessons learned in a mock landing on 'Taongi Island,' an imaginary island reached by crossing Muck Creek [located near the south border of Ft. Lewis, west of Roy, in Pierce County]. To provide more realistic amphibious operations, the regiment established an Amphibious Training Camp on Henderson Inlet, eight miles north of Olympia. A pier, administrative buildings, barracks, and mess hall were constructed. The 15th Regiment operated this training facility, which was used by the entire 3rd Division. It was equipped with 40 landing craft and other boats. The first amphibious exercise took place in November 1940 with soldiers loading into the landing craft, moving out, and then returning to the pier to unload. On December 1, 1940, a full-scale landing was carried out with the nine 3rd Division battalions. The attacking forces loaded at Henderson Inlet and conducted a landing on a gravel beach on the north side of McNeill Island. They moved inland a few hundred yards to a defined point. The 3rd Division had amphibious techniques as its primary training mission and received instruction from the Amphibious Corps Pacific Fleet, a Navy-Marine headquarters in San Diego."[2]

Despite a statement in Denfeld's narration immediately above, the date of December 1, 1940 must be inaccurate unless the described exercise was staged from a location in use prior to construction of the camp on Henderson Inlet.

Training at the camp was well under way by June, 1941. "Residents along the shoreline have been amazed to see scores of army assault boats suddenly appear from nowhere, filled to the gunwales with armed soldiers. Without warning, the boat would head for shore, push up on the beach, and the rocks would swarm with crawling khaki figures.

"The [3]rd Division boat detachment has been one of those newly created outfits of which the army speaks only in a whisper. Until recently any information on its activities was unavailable. . . .

"At the present time, the outfit has about 130 in its camp on Henderson Inlet. It has ten assault boats, built along the lines of Navy shore boats, each holding 40 men. The boats are capable of traveling 16 knots and their crews run them on shore wherever a beach head is to be established.

"The addition of a boat detachment to the 3rd Division is part of the government's plan to make each division a combat team, embodying every instrument and means of modern warfare.

Image 3. A 1945 U.S. Navy photograph of a Higgins boat, one of several watercrafts used at the Henderson Inlet camp. The boat in this image was launched from the USS Darke *during the assault on Okinawa in April 1945. The technical name for the Higgins boat was "Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP)." It was designed by Andrew Higgins, who "based it on boats made for operating in swamps and marshes. More than 23,358 were built by Higgins Industries (based in New Orleans, Louisiana) and licensees" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LCVP_(United_States) : accessed November 15, 2023).*

"Later this summer, staff officers said, the detachment will receive about 40 'Higgins landing boats' which skim over the top of the water with great speed and can crawl on and off the beach with ease. The boats will move a force of about 1,500 men at one landing attempt. The operation of these boats is held in great secrecy and a few that were received this spring were finally approved and sent to the 1st Division on the east coast."[3]

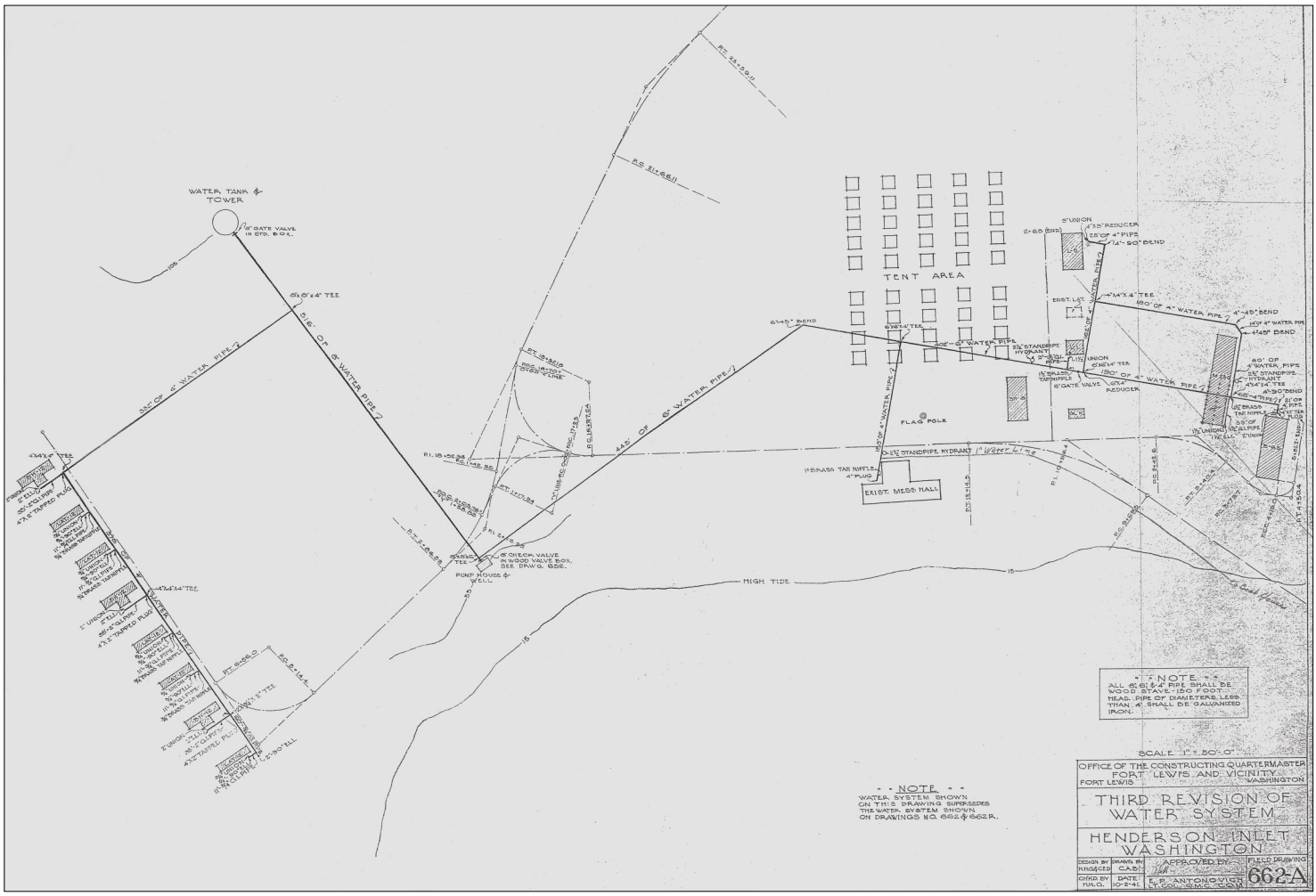


Image 4. A map of the water system built for the Henderson Inlet camp. The system included a well approximately 1,100 feet deep, which is still used by current area residents. "Third Revision Of Water System Henderson Inlet Washington." Field Drawing 662-A. Office Of The Constructing Quartermaster Fort Lewis And Vicinity, Fort Lewis Washington. October 2, 1941. Provided to the author by a current occupant of land formerly part of the camp.

By August 1941, camp personnel participated in war games. "Speedy landing boats were used successfully by the Ninth Army Corps Monday in what officers said Tuesday was their first baptism as U. S. Army maneuvers infantry carriers.

"Twelve motor boats were rushed out of Henderson Inlet, near Olympia, to speed 400 infantrymen across an arm of Puget Sound to intercept a tank battalion which apparently was moving against the vital U. S. Navy Yard at Bremerton."[4]

Image 5. "Tank lighter being hoisted aboard USS CURTISS (AV-4), 5 February 1941." National Archives, Catalog #80-G-185566 (https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/80-G-185000/80-G-185566.html : accessed November 15, 2023).

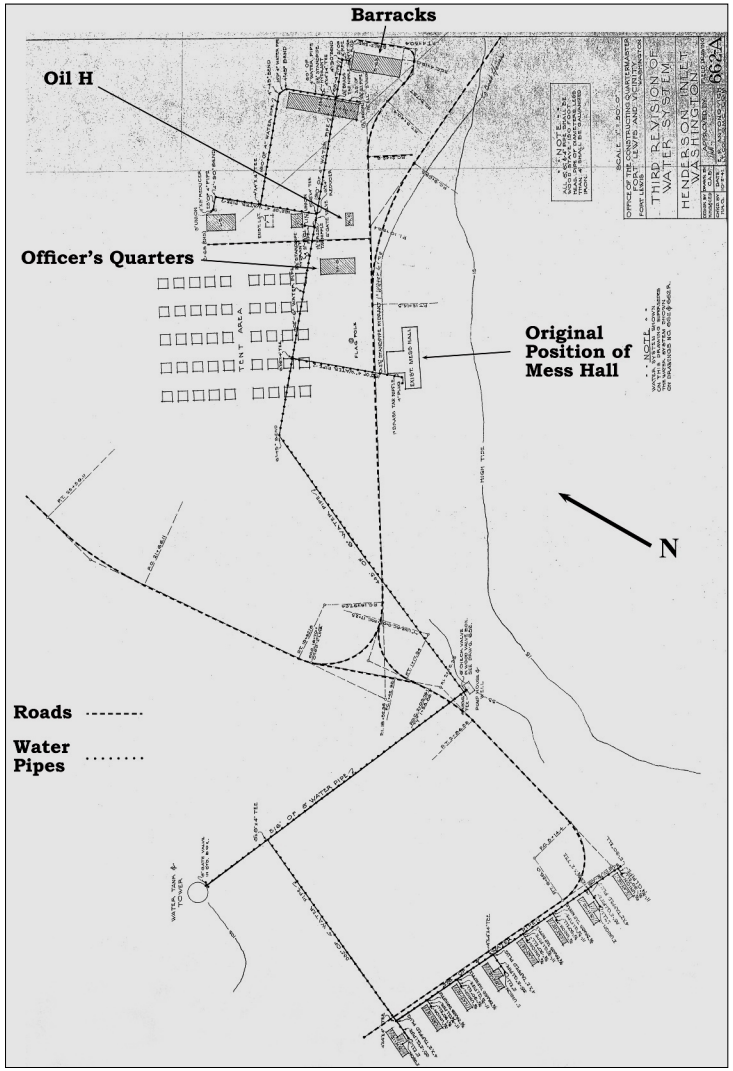


Image 6. On this map of the camp's water system, water pipes and roads have been highlighted by the author. The roads seen here were built by the Army to a high standard. Many continue in use in modern times. All structures currently remaining in their original positions are labelled.

The camp on Henderson Inlet continued to expand in October 1941, when a map for the third revision of the facility's water system was prepared. That document identifies an already existing latrine ("exist. Lat.") within the group of buildings visible on the map.

In December 1941, tank-carrying landing craft arrived at the camp, augmenting the troop-carrying boats already there. "Four new tank lighters arrived in Henderson Inlet Wednesday to be used by troops of the Army's Third Division Boat Detachment in landing operations practice.

"The huge rectangular vessels are equipped with blunt bows which can be lowered as ramps, permitting tanks to roll off under their own power.

"The 12,000 regular troops of the Third Division have been carrying on maneuvers, cruising in the southern part of Puget Sound for several months. The training is for the purpose of teaching the division how to unload from transports—in a hurry. Marine and Navy will participate in the maneuvers later."[5]

A current resident of one part of the former camp recalls a past conversation with a person who lived nearby when the camp was active. To simulate the wave action which would be encountered in the open ocean, a large freighter was

sometimes seen in Henderson Inlet, sailing in a continuous, wide circle. The freighter's wake created artificial waves.

"On February 15, 1942, the 15th Infantry Regiment was assigned the duty of defending the Washington coastline from Seattle to Canada. In May 1942 orders arrived for the regiment to move to Fort Ord. The soldiers received additional training to become combat ready. In September the regiment was sent to Camp Pickett, Virginia, to await overseas shipment. On October 24, 1942, the 15th departed from Norfolk, Virginia, as part of the 3rd Infantry Division, bound for French Morocco."[6]

Although the 15th Infantry Regiment was no longer in residence at the camp, the facility continued in use by the army. A September 1943 newspaper article referred to it as "the Army's Henderson Inlet guard detachment station."[7]

As 1944 drew to a close, the army decided that it no longer needed its training camp on Henderson Inlet. The land upon which the camp was sited had been leased, rather than purchased, so only the camp buildings were put up for sale. "The Office of the Pacific Division of United States Army Engineers has announced through the Seattle real estate suboffice that the War Department will sell eighteen buildings or structures located on the west shore of Henderson Inlet, approximately nine miles northeast of Olympia. This camp was constructed for the training of amphibious landing forces in groups of 250 men and is in excellent condition. The buildings comprise a camp complete in all details. The entire camp is supplied with electric power, telephone service and modern water and sewage systems. A pier, 597 feet in length, is equipped with crane, boat house and sixteen floating slips and is serviced by gasoline, Diesel fuel and fresh water lines.

"The sale will be by sealed bids, acceptable until November 15, at office headquarters in City-County Building, Seattle 4. Bids may be for one or more of the improvements or on all in the camp."[8]

The land where most of the camp buildings were located was leased from George A. and Ina W. Hall. The Halls had purchased that property in 1932 and in December 1944, the parcel was sold to Abe Sherman.[9]

Part or all of at least three camp buildings remain standing at the site of the former camp in 2024. Not all are in their original locations. Some of the Mess Hall remains at the place where it was constructed and is now the residence at 8344 Libby Road NE (parcel #11908230201).

Sometime after 1944, another part of the Mess Hall was moved to a location northeast of its original position where, for several years, it sat at the top of the bank, near the water's edge. As a result of a landslide in 1997, it

Image 7. Assessor's photograph of the residence at 8344 Libby Road NE. The basic part of this structure is the portion of the Mess Hall which remains in its original position. An assessor's note reports that two-by-four lumber used in the joists are "1940 vintage." A resident of this area informed the author that Don Esterly lived in the original Mess Hall when it was damaged by the October 12, 1962 Columbus Day storm. Thereafter, Esterly moved part of the Mess Hall to a position along the top of the bank, northeast of the location of this photograph.

was moved again, this time to a more inland position, where it is found in 2024 as the residence at 8342 Libby Road NE (parcel #11908230202).

Next to the portion of the former Mess Hall at 8342 Libby Road is a structure currently used partly as a secondary residence and partly for storage. It sits upon the same parcel as the 8342 Libby Road residence and remains in its original location. The current owner of this building mentioned to the author that it had been used as the Officer's Quarters.

Graffiti inscribed in chalk on the interior of the storage area reads: "We will all be back when we finish them Japs." "To the future bilge rats . . ." "Goodbye Henderson Inlet, Hello

Image 8. Author's 2023 photograph of the residence at 8342 Libby Road NE. A portion of this structure was originally constructed in 1942 as part of the Mess Hall. That part was first moved to the northeast sometime after 1962 and then, after 1997, to its current position. Various additions have been made to the original structure. Along the front (waterfront) side of this building can be seen traces of the camp's road built by the Army in 1942. In the left background of this image, a fence is visible which cuts across the old road.

'Tokyo'." "Australia." "Good by Wash. I been a duck long enough-Ko??." "Papy Bro??? deserted." "Henderson Inlet, May 9, 1942 and will return May 9, 1944 when finished."

As in the history of the Mess Hall, part of the Barracks building was moved (about 2002-2003) to a new location. Assessor's data shows that it was constructed in 1942. Now it is the primary residence at 8324 Libby Road (parcel #11908230400).

According to the assessor, two other 1942-era buildings are found on the

same parcel as the relocated portion of the Barracks. A definite prior location for each of them has not been discovered by the author. One sits across a remnant of road built when the camp was set up. It is a one-story, 308-square-foot cottage which lies east of the Barracks building. The other structure is a 240-square-foot storage shed which might be the "Oil H" visible in the water system plan shown on page 11. In that case, the shed is in its original position.

The property at 8340 Libby Road NE (parcel #11908230200) is sited immediately northeast of the three structures at 8324 Libby Road NE. A 768-square-foot shop building constructed in 1942 is found on that parcel. It consists of a surviving part of the original Barracks (a portion which was not moved).

Assessor's data also reveals that in the past, a 399-square-foot former "Shower Building" existed on this same parcel. An entry from February 1974 notes that this structure had been torn down. It probably had been a remnant of the much larger Shower Building visible (on the map of the fa-

Image 9. Author's 2023 photograph of a smaller, secondary residence and storage space at 8342 Libby Road. This was built in 1942 and remains in its original position. The current owner was informed that this had been the Officer's Quarters.

We will All Be Back
WHEN WE FINISH THEM TAPES
Goodbye

CLEAR PLASTIC CURTAIN
RUBBER MAT
12'X68'

cility's water system) immediately west of the original site of the Barracks building. In modern times, there is no trace of the Shower Building, for years ago, a mounded septic system drain field was placed where it had existed.

The original road from the main camp site to the pier on Henderson Inlet is still in use to this day.

Image 17 is designed to show the relative positions of the structures, described above, on a portion of the October 1941 map of the camp's water system.

The same area is displayed in Images 18 and 19 as it appeared in 1968 and 2006.

It is reassuring to see that many buildings from this significant part of Thurston County history are being preserved at the site of the former Army camp.

NOTES

[1] "Rumor Post At Olympia – Army May Buy Big Tract On Henderson Inlet," *The News Tribune* (Tacoma), December 6, 1940, page 16.

[2] Duane Colt Denfeld, Ph.D., 15th Regiment, United States Army (https://www.historylink.org/File/10353 : accessed November 10, 2023).

[3] "3rd Division Boat Unit In Secret Maneuvers," *The News Tribune*, June 15, 1941, page 7-A.

[4] "Henderson Inlet Boats Rushed Into War Games," *Daily Olympian*, August 19, 1941, page 1.

[5] "Tank Lighters Arrive For Boat Detachment At Henderson Inlet," *Daily Olympian*, December 3, 1941, page 1.

[6] Denfeld.

[7] "SPAR Will Induct Two Members As Cruise Highlight," *Daily Olympian*, September 24, 1943, page 10.

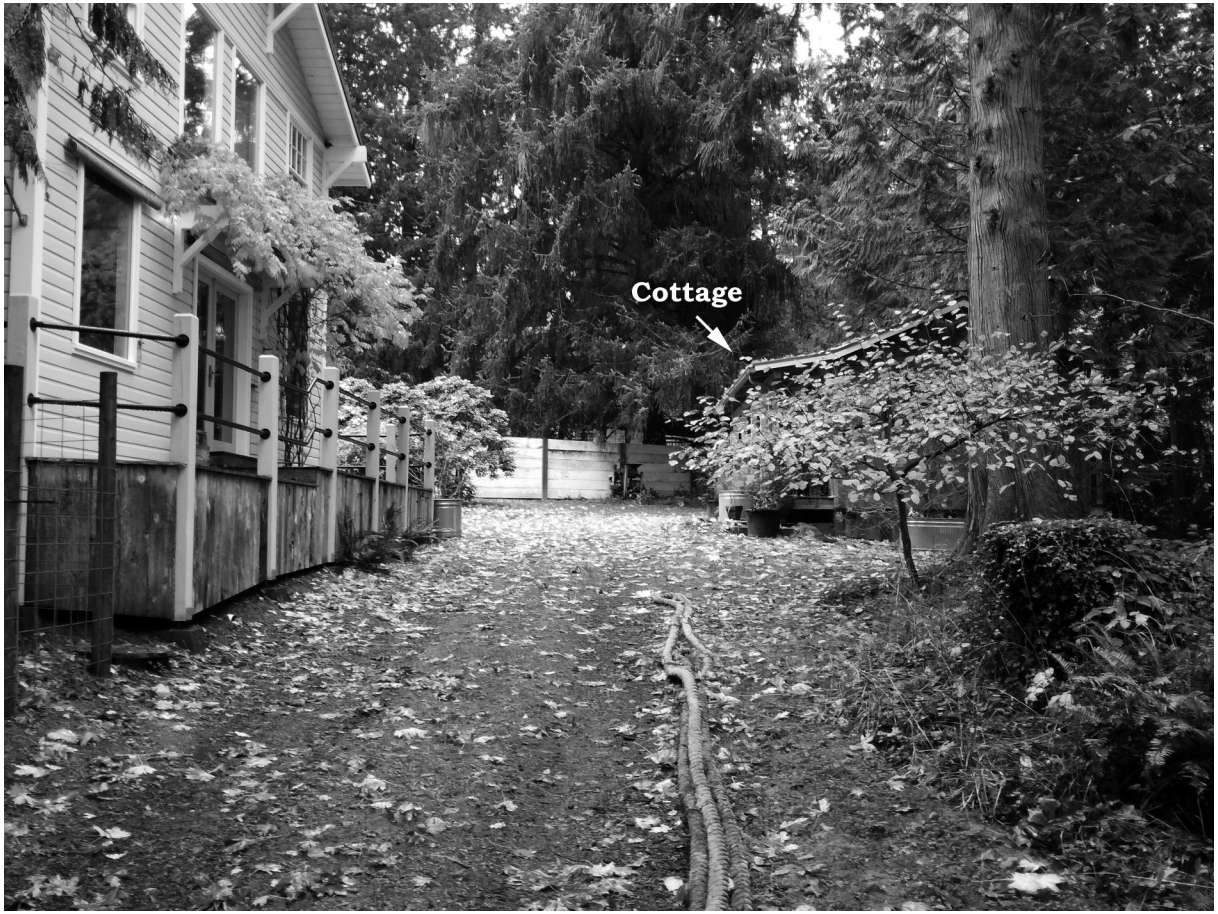
[8] "Henderson Inlet Camp For Sale," *Daily Olympian*, November 2, 1944, page 2.

[9] Thurston County Deed Book 144, page 639, June 18, 1932 (the purchase by George A. and Ina W. Hall); and Thurston County Deed Book 171, page 560, December 6, 1944 (the sale to Abe Sherman). The 1944 deed excluded from the transaction "a lease to the United States government on a portion of the above tract."

***Opposite**: Images 10 and 11. Author's photographs of the left and right side of boards containing graffiti in the Officer's Quarters.*

***Above**: Image 12. Author's 2023 photograph of the part of the former Barracks currently located at 8324 Libby Road NE. Constructed in 1942, it was moved here circa 1992 from its original position on the property at 8340 Libby Road NE. On this same property are two other structures also constructed about 1942. A storage shed represents the "Oil H" building visible on the October 1941 map of the water system. It is in its original position. The final structure is a secondary residence described as a cottage.*

***Opposite**: Image 13. Author's 2023 photograph of the secondary residence (described as a cottage) located on the property at 8324 Libby Road NE. This structure was moved here sometime in the past. The author could not determine its previous location. Beyond the fence seen in the distance (and not visible here) is the remnant of the Barracks which is still in its original position. It appears to be the northwest portion of that structure, now used as a shop.*



Dr. Hannum is a retired physician and surgeon who arrived in western Washington in 1971. Railroad history has been a life-long interest, and he Dr. Hannum is a retired physician and surgeon who arrived in western Washington has written several books on the subject.

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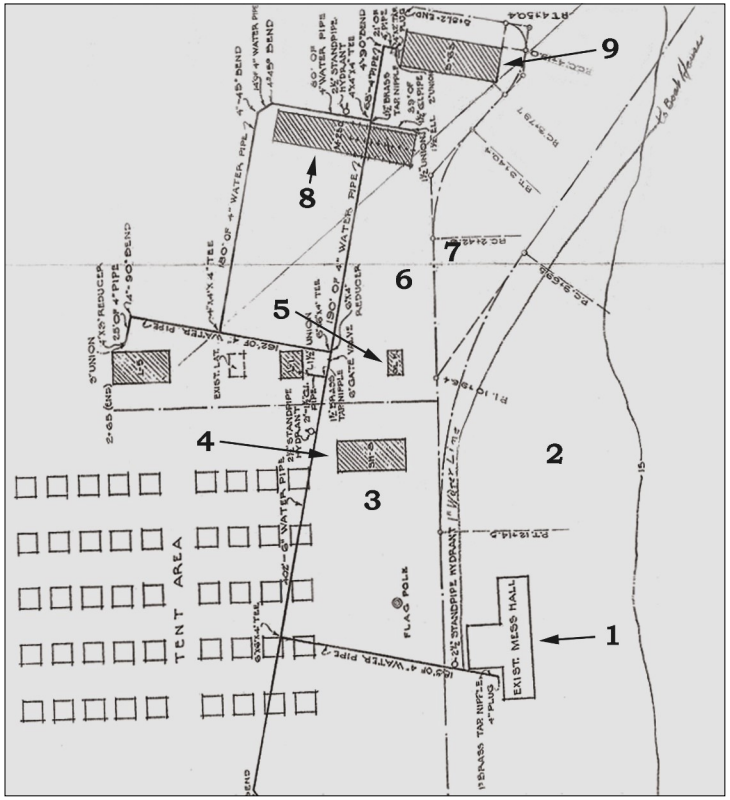
***Above**: Image 14. Author's 2023 photograph of the northwest end of the Barracks (in the foreground, on the left). This structure is in its original position, on the property at 8340 Libby Road. This is a view toward the south, and in the background can be seen the part of the Barracks that was moved to 8324 Libby Road. A garden cart rests on part of the area formerly occupied by the Shower Building.*

***Opposite top**: Image 15. Author's 2023 photograph of the southeast side of the part of the Barracks remaining in its original position. The siding on this wall was put in place when the structure was divided into two pieces; the windows were moved to this wall from their original positions.*

***Opposite bottom**: Image 16. Author's 2023 photograph looking downhill to the east, toward the current pier on Henderson Inlet.*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8
7
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2
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TENT AREA
FLAG POLE
EXIST. MESS HALL

9
5
4
2
1

***Opposite top**: Image 17. Part of the October 1941 map of the water system at the camp. The current and former positions of several buildings are indicated by numbers 1 through 9. 1 = Original location of the Mess Hall and current location of the residence at 8344 Libby Road NE. 2 = Location of part of the Mess Hall after 1962 and before it was moved to its current location, after 1997. 3 = Current location of the part of the Mess Hall which has been moved twice. The address is 8342 Lilly Road NE. 4 = The Officer's Quarters, which remains in its original position. It is a secondary residence at the same address as 3. 5 = The "Oil H" which is in its original position. 6 = The part of the Barracks which was moved to 8324 Libby Road NE. 7 = The cottage located at 8324 Libby Road NE. 8 = The Shower Building, which had been torn down by 1974. 9 = The original location of the Barracks.*

***Opposite bottom**: Image 18. A 1968 aerial photograph of the former camp buildings. The numbers visible here correspond to the preceding 1941 map. Here, 2 reveals the location of part of the Mess Hall, after 1962, before it was moved to its current location, after 1997. The Barracks (9) remained intact at its original position.*

***Above**: Image 19. A 2006 aerial photograph of the former camp buildings. The numbers visible here correspond to the preceding 1941 map. The part of the Mess Hall which was moved twice can be seen in its current position (3). The portion of the Barracks which was moved (once) was visible as 6.*